



# Self-Governance and Adaptation: Rethinking Indigenous Arctic Histories

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

How can a self-governance perspective reshape our understanding of Indigenous Arctic histories? This paper aims at advancing our understanding about aboriginal societies and their historical use of common pool resources. By applying a self-governance approach, it moves beyond state-centric narratives that have long dominated interpretations of historical change, and highlights how Indigenous agency and internal dynamics have shaped historical trajectories.

Aboriginal societies around the world have independently transitioned their production modes throughout history. In northern Eurasia, one such major transition manifested in a movement away from transport reindeer herding towards reindeer pastoralism from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Northern Fennoscandia was one of the first regions to witness this shift, and the Indigenous Sami there are an especially suitable case to study.

The historical sources are exceptionally rich in the area, and Sami are an interesting case because reindeer pastoralism developed in a foraging culture, with many households continuing on as hunters and fishers long after pastoralism had been introduced. The shift to pastoralism was driven by concomitant, self-governed responses as the transition progressed.

By combining historical sources and self-governance frameworks, this analysis advances the discussion about how Indigenous reindeer-herding societies – governance and social relations included – were affected by the transformation from 1550–1800 AD. The Sami case reflects that there was a dynamic interaction between customary rules-in-use and colonial rules-in-form, that complicates interpretations of Indigenous societies as either autonomous or passive in historical shifts.

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## INTRODUCTION

How can a self-governance perspective reshape our understanding of Indigenous Arctic histories? By applying a self-governance lens, we can shed new light on historic Indigenous social and economic development. This analysis focuses on early modern northern Fennoscandia<sup>1</sup> and how the Indigenous Sami by self-governing continually adapted their natural resource management to environmental and other external factors, underscoring their flexibility, ingenuity and decision-making capacity. A self-governance approach moves our understanding beyond state-centric narratives that have long dominated interpretations of historical change and highlights how Indigenous agency and internal dynamics shaped historical trajectories.

Although these dynamics are significant, we know little about the consequences of historical transformations for reindeer herding societies in northern Eurasia ([Istomin 2022](#)). Historical change happens for many reasons and different internal and external pressures can bring about a shift in the economy. This shift often leads to new governance strategies. In this analysis we focus on how Indigenous governance systems have evolved among the Sami in northern Fennoscandia.

Our analysis suggests new ways forward to increase the knowledge of Arctic history particularly about local governance and social relations. It contributes to a decolonial and more comprehensive understanding of early modern history by foregrounding Indigenous practices and perspectives that fills a gap in the existing discourse.

The early modern era is a crucial period for examining these dynamics as major changes occurred in reindeer herding societies all over Eurasia around that time when Indigenous groups shifted from foraging with small reindeer herds to reindeer pastoralism. The shift to pastoralism coincided with the emergence of governing states, and local inhabitants had to navigate self-governance with shifting power relations. However, while states aimed to control populations, they often lacked the means to understand the local economy, and regardless of ambitions they could not fully enforce authority until the nineteenth century.

Local communities relied on local resources for sustenance, and households produced most of the goods they needed ([Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022](#)). Environmental factors had great influence on livelihoods, especially in the harsh Arctic climate, and local governance was essential for both short-term survival and long-term food security. The Sami relied mostly on fishing waters, hunting grounds and grazing lands which were managed as common pool resources (CPRs). These resources required collaborative governance and locally adapted institutions (norms and rules) for ensuring a just and robust management.

In this analysis we argue for more comparative analyses between pastoralist groups with different ecological and societal settings. By expanding the geographical and longitudinal scales of studies, broader patterns of Indigenous self-governance can be analyzed. At the same time, it is essential to stay committed to contextual and culturally specific interpretations to avoid a deterministic understanding of history. In fact, the theoretical foundation in self-governance emphasizes the importance of diversity in adaptive strategies and stresses that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions ([Ostrom 2005](#)).

The primary aim of our analysis is to offer a theoretical contribution by demonstrating how a self-governance lens can generate new and wider explanations to historical transformations. We do this by showing that self-governing structures existed at the local level, and by identifying and naming them we will be better placed to consider the self-governance mechanisms in Sami societies and how they have shifted over time. The paper contributes with novel perspectives on Indigenous governance at the micro level by presenting Indigenous agency and internal dynamics as significant drivers of historical change. We can also go beyond dominating interpretations and contribute to framing Arctic history in a new way.

## STARTING POINTS

### SELF-GOVERNANCE

History as a subject has always been occupied with questions about transitions and change, and many of the ‘big’ debates have revolved around their causes and consequences. In early modern Europe some of the most well-known are the French, Agricultural, Industrial, and Scientific revolutions, all part of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The focus for these transitions has mainly been on northwestern Europe ([Aston and Philpin 1985](#)). In a global perspective, there are other significant transitions, and the shift from a foraging to a pastoral economy is one of them, occurring independently across many Indigenous societies worldwide.

For Arctic and subarctic reindeer herders a radical shift in economic focus, from foraging to pastoralism, manifested from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. People went from fishing, hunting and gathering – with small reindeer herds for transport – to reindeer pastoralism with large herds. Pastoralists focus on the management of their grazing animals, which often entail seasonal movements to find available feed or water, with the purpose of optimizing the output of milk, blood, and meat, partly to trade with other groups and sometimes even with distant markets through middlemen. This transformation spanned a vast area and took place among culturally divergent

reindeer herding groups, spanning from the Chukchee in northeastern Asia to the Sami in northwestern Europe (Krupnik 1993; Khazanov 1994; Vitebsky 2005; Istomin 2022). Moreover, it was a fairly rapid process; in just a couple of centuries almost all reindeer herding societies had either become pastoralists or disappeared. Despite the massive scale and the proximity to our time, little is known about what impact it had on governing, property rights and social relations and the role of local communities in this shift. To fully understand the mechanisms of this transformation we argue that the analysis must include a self-governance perspective.

Kooiman and van Vliet (2000:360) define self-governance as “the capacity of societal entities to provide the necessary means to develop and maintain their identity, by and large, by themselves – and thus show a relatively high degree of social-political autonomy.” In this study of Sami society, the management of CPRs is central as it forms the basis for self-governance where the actors themselves make all major decisions about how the CPRs are used (Ostrom 1990:64). Self-governance is a concept applied across many disciplines, and its meaning varies by field. In political science, it is argued that self-governing enhances human capabilities, reduces conflict and maximizes social information through decentralized systems (Herzberg 2005:190–191). It fosters social cohesion and builds a shared understanding that helps individuals consider a broader set of future possibilities beyond short-term self-interest. This broadens their ability to secure a good life in the long term, which is especially important for people living in the unpredictable Arctic environment. As reindeer herding communities shifted from hunting and fishing to pastoralism, older self-governing institutions transformed to reflect new social norms and rules where reciprocal relations grew in importance. These institutions can also hold and exercise authority.

The Bloomington School on Political Economy emphasizes the importance of considering environmental and social complexity when addressing multifaceted social-ecological problems (Ostrom 2010:317). Moreover, it highlights the importance of creating institutions at multiple levels to support robust governance, especially of CPRs (Ostrom 1990; 2005). In line with this tradition, our analysis focuses on real-world problems in an early modern Indigenous society, including how daily life was organized and what worked in practice, and the layered institutional structures. Accordingly, we take a descriptive rather than normative approach to self-governance. By doing so, we can shed light on Indigenous institutions, customs, property rights and social relations during the early stages of colonial influence – areas that have mostly been

overlooked. This is made possible by drawing on unique historical sources. To address these gaps, it is essential to move beyond assumptions and examine how Indigenous actors actively shaped their governance systems during this transitional period.

Sami historiography during the past 40 to 50 years has attracted interest from a variety of academic disciplines, resulting in several interdisciplinary studies. This renewed focus on Sami history contrasts sharply with earlier academic viewpoints that portrayed the Sami as lacking ‘history’ and perceived their livelihoods as static and unchanged over time (Hansen and Olsen 2014:3). Since the 1970s, archeology has mostly focused on the period before 1600, while historical and ethnological research has focused on the period after 1800. In contrast, the early modern period has attracted limited attention, with most studies on the encounter between the Sami and the rising nation-states of Sweden, Denmark-Norway and Russia.

Up to the 1980s, anthropology and ethnology, the main disciplines studying reindeer herding peoples, took a particular interest in societies who were perceived as different or ‘other’ than the researcher’s own society. At that time, Indigenous groups were often portrayed as primitive or savage. In the 1980s, the focus on the ‘other’ shifted to a focus on the ‘suffering’ subjects, emphasizing the loss of self-determination due to colonial processes (Robbins 2013). Since then, many studies have focused on the impact of colonial structures, concluding that they severely undermined Indigenous governance systems. However, to understand Indigenous governance we argue that longitudinal studies, each following an Indigenous group over centuries and investigating how they changed their own economy, social relations, and production mode are necessary.

Regarding governance and social relations, limited source material and a lack of attention to actors’ self-governance have prevented a fuller understanding of how the shift to pastoralism transformed these societies. However, recent research on historical Sami society has demonstrated that self-governance theory can be effectively applied to analyze Indigenous institution-building. This recent research focuses on the governance of natural resources, such as fishing, hunting, and reindeer pastoralism, between 1550 and 1780, examining how property rights were negotiated among local actors (Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022:215–231).

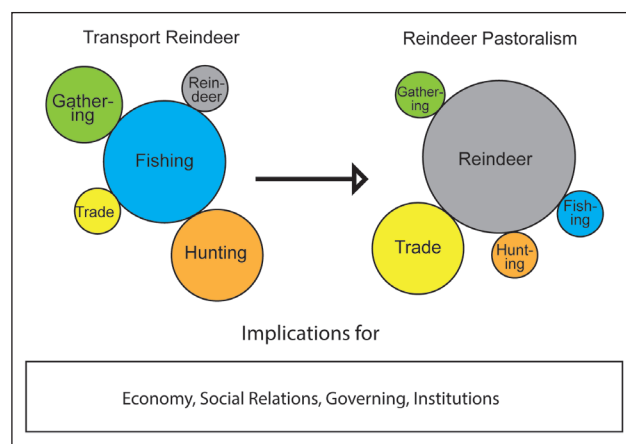
## THE TRANSITION TO PASTORALISM

Northern Fennoscandia was among the first regions to shift to reindeer pastoralism (Vorren 1980; Lundmark 1982; Hansen and Olsen 2014; Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022), with the Sami in the interior northwest starting this

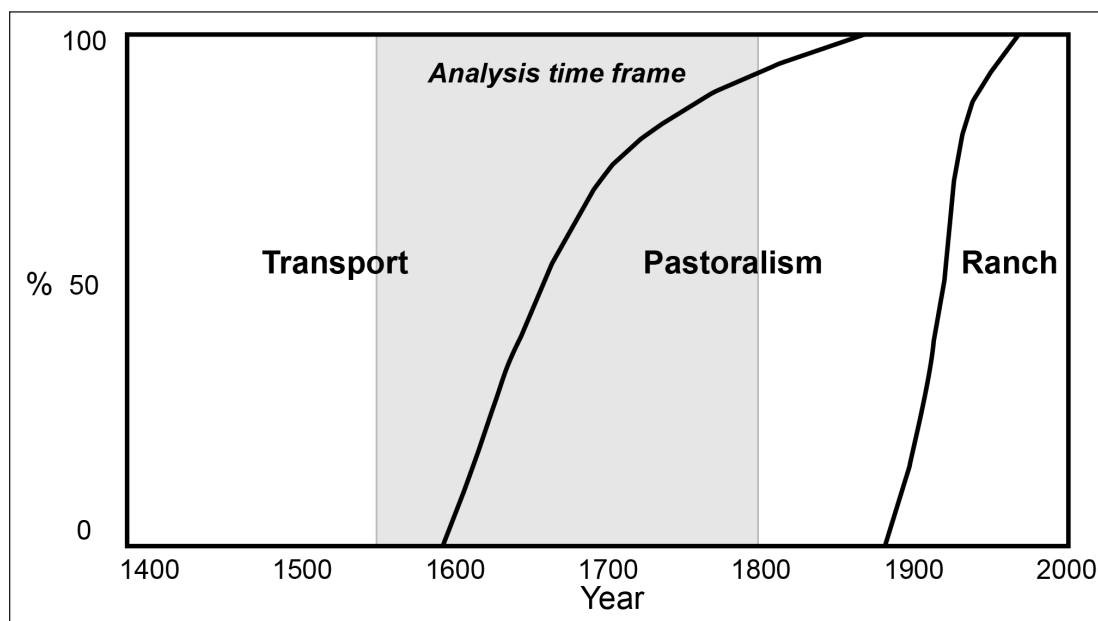
transition approximately around 1600 and completing it by 1750. It has exceptionally rich historical sources compared to other regions where this shift occurred, stemming from detailed records produced by the Swedish state during its encounters with the Sami. Moreover, Sami society is an interesting case because reindeer pastoralism emerged within a foraging culture, and many households continued as foragers even as the transition to pastoralism dominated the region. Historical sources capture foragers and pastoralists which makes it possible to analyze both production modes simultaneously (Figure 1). Within each Sami district, the inhabitants engaged in considerable interactions and shared a common culture irrespective of economy.

The transition to reindeer pastoralism in Eurasia cannot be explained by a single, clear cause. Several factors may have contributed, including population changes, diseases, state policies, environmental degradation, climate changes, and emerging market opportunities (Krupnik 1993; Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022; NOU 2007:14). Societal change is usually driven by multiple factors, even if one may be more decisive. In this paper, we set aside the question of causes and focus instead on the consequences. Regardless of the driving forces, the transition these societies experienced led to concomitant, self-governed responses as the shift unfolded. The economy transformed through deliberate decisions made by Indigenous actors (individuals who interact to effect outcomes [McGinnis and Ostrom 2014]), underlining their role as policymakers in historical

economic changes. In low-density populated northwest Fennoscandia, with abundant natural feed for reindeer and great prior know-how in herding, it was possible for people to shift to pastoralism, and consequently transform local societies (Figure 2). We use the term *production mode* to underscore that material conditions foreground how societies organize production. It has implications for social relations, property rights and governance (Newman 1983). The Arctic environment set sharp limits for people's livelihoods but within these boundaries there were many ways for inhabitants to organize a good life.



**Figure 2** Comparison of five subsistence activities in two reindeer husbandry modes in northwest Fennoscandia. We assume that the shift from transport reindeer husbandry to pastoralism had profound societal impacts across northern Eurasia (1600–1900).



**Figure 1** A schematic timeline of reindeer herding economies in northwest Fennoscandia, with the analysis time frame in grey. The Y-axis shows the proportion of households in each production mode.

### THREE PRODUCTION MODES OF REINDEER HERDING

During the past 1500 years, northern Fennoscandia has experienced a sequence of three distinct production modes involving domesticated reindeer. The first mode was based on fishing and hunting of wild reindeer and other game and saw the emergence of small, domesticated herds to carry loads and haul sledges. The domestication of reindeer had profound consequences on people's livelihoods by enabling a mobile lifestyle that allowed people a more efficient use of scattered resources. The earliest written record of tame reindeer in Fennoscandia dates to AD 890 when we are told that the Norwegian chieftain Ottar had six tame reindeer and 600 wild reindeer in his possession (Bjørklund 2019:91). Domesticated reindeer were also used as decoy in wild reindeer hunting and for milking – the first evidence of milking dates to AD 1350 (Aronsson 1991; Egelkraut et al. 2018). While the domestication process has been extensively studied (Sommersteth 2011; Bjørnstad et al. 2012), the transition to the next production mode – reindeer pastoralism – has received less attention.

In the second mode herders managed large herds of domesticated reindeer that they were engaging in daily, including for milking. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the herds in northwestern Fennoscandia could number several hundred or sometimes more than a thousand (Högström 1747; Rheen 1897; Lundius 1905; Linneus 2003). A large proportion of the herd was milked which together with close tending rendered a labor-intensive production. To ensure grazing, reindeer herds had to be moved between summer and winter grazing lands, movements that often stretched more than 100 km. Reindeer pastoralism was a specialization of the economy (Khazanov 1994) and with large herds other subsistence activities like fishing and hunting were not as prioritized (Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022). A modern description of pastoralists around the globe is that they rely economically on livestock but also exploit other resources in diverse combinations (Reid et al. 2014). The third mode was established in the twentieth century and involved less daily interaction with the reindeer than in pastoralism. The herds were still large and migrated seasonally, but the use of the animals was less versatile and focused mainly on meat and hides for markets. Unlike before, it was no longer necessary for the entire household to follow the herds (Ingold 1980; Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022). This form of herding is the predominant production mode still practiced in Fennoscandia today.

In this analysis we focus on the shift from production mode one to mode two, and how it can contribute to a deeper understanding of transitions in governance and social structures in an Indigenous context.

### UNEARTHING ARCTIC COMMONS: SOURCES AND CONCEPTS

#### UNIQUE SOURCES FROM NORTHERN FENNOSCANDIA

A problem with gaining knowledge about early modern Indigenous governance is that it is often hard to retrieve information since there are few historical sources that can tell us about governance and social structure in a detailed way. A rare exception is the Sami districts in northern Fennoscandia offering primary sources that other regions lack. However, the Sami themselves produced virtually no written records before the twentieth century, so the information must be pieced together from sources produced by others, principally those of the Swedish state, the Lutheran Church, and scientific organizations.

The two key sources for studies of early modern Sami livelihoods are court records and accounts from priests, missionaries, scientists and travelers. In the early seventeenth century, local courts were established by the Swedish state in a vast area in interior northern Fennoscandia called *Lappmarken* where the population was almost entirely Sami. There were six Sami districts in *Lappmarken*, each with a court that convened for a few days each year. Scandinavian law is distinctive among legal traditions, and one of its features is a strong influence of laypersons in the court system (Malmström 1969; Ågren 1992; Zweigert and Kötz 1998; Österberg et al. 2000; Korpiola 2014; Larsson 2016). The court was led by a judge, who made decisions in conjunction with a panel of twelve men called lay judges – most of whom were Sami in the courts in *Lappmarken* – who were selected among the tax-paying people in the court district. The courts handled cases on land use, criminal matters, and religious disputes and the proceedings were documented in court records. The lay judges influenced many cases regarding land use, but even in criminal cases and religious matters, where the state's view prevailed, they informed the court about circumstances that could shed light on the local customs. In the court rulings, it is also possible to 'hear' Sami voices when plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses described what had happened, often in detail (Larsson 2016; Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022). Court records have also been used by other scholars, mostly in relation to settler colonization (Hultblad 1968; Arell 1977), and the organization of taxation based on land belonging to the Sami and its implication for property rights (Holmbäck 1922; Korpiakko-Labba 1994; Päiviö 2011).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, interest in the Sami and their region increased, driven by geopolitical concerns, religious missions, resource exploitation, and curiosity about Indigenous culture. The earliest accounts



came from missionaries and clergy, later complemented by scientists and travelers. Although some of the accounts have biases and skewed interpretations (Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022:50–52), together they provide robust and detailed images of Sami livelihood. In conjunction with the court records, the accounts offer deep insights into how the transition from foraging to pastoralism played out.

Although Sami society went through major changes in the shift to pastoralism, the transformation was far from absolute. Many households continued as hunters and fishers alongside pastoralist households and the written sources mirror both production modes, which allows for a broad investigation of their coexistence and interactions. Previous research has shown the ongoing significance of fishing (Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2020) and hunting (Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2021) particularly for poor households even as reindeer pastoralism emerged. It is also noteworthy that many foragers continued to have small reindeer herds for transports. Correspondingly, research on an early modern system for transhumance in central Sweden has shown that supposedly static animal husbandry systems were, in fact, highly flexible, with progressing governance structures (Larsson 2009; 2012).

Court rulings and written accounts cover the mid-seventeenth century onward, but to reconstruct Sami society in the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century proxy data from cadastral and tax records are required. Although less detailed than accounts and court rulings, these sources remain among the strongest sources available in Eurasia for studying the transformation to pastoralism in early modern Indigenous societies. From the mid-sixteenth century, the Swedish state wanted to control Sami trade and boost tax revenues, likely targeting the lucrative fur trade (Steckzén 1964). From this era, we have the first systematic tax records that provide insights into Sami economy and society, starting with 1553 and with consecutive records through 1620 from Lule lappmark (Lundmark 1982). Additionally, there are printed sources, such as Fellman's (1910–1915) compilation in four volumes of early modern letters, ordinances, and other documents that concerns northern Fennoscandia and thus the Sami. A rationale for starting the analysis around 1550 is the availability of source materials from the era right before the transition to pastoralism.

## KEY CONCEPTS

Besides good historical sources, advancing knowledge on the transition to reindeer pastoralism demand robust methods and theories. Fishing, hunting, and reindeer grazing all imply humans interacting with nature, and require that they have access to land and water. Foragers and pastoralists alike depend on CPRs, which are difficult to

exclude users from, and where the harvest is subtractable. Since they have access to large resource areas it is hard to monitor all users, and if one user takes advantage of a resource someone else cannot: A fish caught by one user cannot be caught by another, and lichens that are grazed by one reindeer cannot be grazed by another. This creates a risk of overuse, and if it is continuous, a depletion of resources or a 'tragedy' of the commons occurs (Hardin 1968). The idea that this tragedy is inevitable when resources are governed collectively has been thoroughly refuted (Ostrom 1990; 2005; Gibson et al. 2005), leading to a new research paradigm.

Since the 1980s, CPR research has mushroomed, with the Bloomington School on Political Economy, co-founded by Elinor Ostrom, among the leaders in the field (Ostrom 1990; 2005; Aligică 2014). A fundamental insight has been that to avoid depletion of resources, actor groups must communicate, negotiate rules, and develop norms with regards to common use of resources. While studies of governing CPRs have focused on local actors, they also mind how these actors interact with each other and higher levels of governance, including the state, which often play a role in handling complex CPR problems (Mansbridge 2014). Studies on CPRs and commons more generally have been strong in many disciplines – economics, political science, and ecology – and interdisciplinary approaches have promoted collaborations, for example in political economy and political ecology.

The rising interest in commons and CPRs has also invigorated historical studies with new perspectives and analyses, not least by reviving longstanding questions about the governing of early modern European commons. These contributions come from all over Europe and have addressed questions concerning depletion of forests, grazing rights, and water management and emphasize a bottom-up perspective, in many cases also spotlighting the uplands that earlier had often been seen as marginal areas (Kajiser 2002; De Moor 2008; 2015; Lana Berasain 2008; Larsson 2012; De Keyzer 2018; Winchester 2022). However, the focus on CPRs has been more limited when it comes to early modern Sami societies and their governance of land and water (Marklund 2015; Norstedt 2018). By applying a CPR perspective and emphasizing self-governance, a new way of writing Sami history has emerged, focusing on the actors' ability to change institutions (Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022), with more extensive contributions stemming from this research.

The Bloomington School on Political Economy includes a focus on CPR governance, where self-determination and collective action are important parts (Ostrom 2005). The Bloomington School views humans as boundedly rational with diverse motivations beyond economic self-interest,

considering ethics, biases, customs, and social well-being. Hence, it is important to include many aspects of early modern Sami economy and culture to understand the decisions actors made that impacted their lives, including moral norms and ethical dispositions (Ostrom 2005). It is also paramount to include ecological factors, and the Bloomington School demonstrates ways to integrate the different aspects through frameworks.

It builds on an interdisciplinary approach that has led to frameworks like Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) and Social-Ecological Systems (SES) (Kiser and Ostrom 1982; Ostrom 2009). The SES was developed in response to IAD's limited focus on the diversity and complexity of natural systems, giving equal weight to social and ecological factors (Cole et al. 2019). It focuses on how actors create institutions for governance and social interactions and is enhanced and further developed by the researchers who use it. In the core of the framework is the action situation, where actors are in positions to make choices among available options (Ostrom 2009; McGinnis and Ostrom 2014). These decisions in policy processes lead to outcomes that, in turn, shape future choices (Ostrom 2009; McGinnis and Ostrom 2014). The system represents a dynamic feedback loop which makes it useful for studying changes.

The framework has not been widely used in historical research, but its value has been demonstrated in analyzing early modern Sami freshwater fishing (Larsson and Pääviö Sjaunja 2020). The SES framework is effective for making sure that all variables needed for a comprehensive analysis are included. At the same time, using it in an early modern Indigenous context, all factors might not be evident in the sources. We might only have some of the pieces of the puzzle of how Indigenous actors created policy. Nevertheless, as a diagnostic tool, the framework clarifies what kinds of data are missing, knowledge that further strengthens future analyses. The framework allows for an interdisciplinary perspective where one can weave together the perspectives and data from humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to understand how actors made decisions to facilitate production and secure the livelihoods of the households. These decisions range from moving reindeer, over trading, to marriage strategies.

Additional features of the Bloomington School are the focus on local systems, and how they have been shaped by humans. However, local governance systems are in most cases nested into regional- and state-level governance systems, and early modern Sami governance was no exception. Smaller-scale organizations tend to be nested in larger organizations. This complex form of governance with multiple centers of semiautonomous decision making is called polycentrism (Ostrom 2005; Thiel et al. 2019).

Polycentric governance is characterized by the presence of many centers of decision making, which are formally autonomous and may compete and/or collaborate under an overarching shared system of rules. Adopting a polycentric perspective means to conceptualize society as a collection of rule-based interactions between individuals, shaped by individuals. With a polycentric perspective, we acknowledge that the transition to reindeer pastoralism was a complex process with many households and user groups, such as the *siida*, that made decisions about how to steer their economy, and that these decisions in turn were nested into larger groups and higher levels of governance. The use of court rulings in combination with written accounts allows us to unearth *rules-in-use*, meaning what happened on the ground and how social relations were shaped by local people and institutions. This contrasts to studies that use by-laws or more normative sources, that instead tell us about *rules-in-form*.

According to the Bloomington School, there are no panaceas, or one-size-fits-all solutions to complex social or governance dilemmas. The approach emphasizes empirical, problem-based analysis of institutions and views the individual as the primary unit of focus. This emphasis on individual agency makes it apt for analyzing the transition to reindeer pastoralism.

## REINTERPRETING SAMI SOCIETY AND GOVERNANCE

### A NEW BASELINE

The transition to reindeer pastoralism was a bottom-up process. External factors most likely triggered the transition, but decisions by actors and actor groups made it happen. Understanding how this shift unfolded requires a deeper exploration of the governance system in place and its adaptation. By analyzing early modern Indigenous governance in northern Fennoscandia, we can advance the understandings of this transformation.

Historical studies on how Indigenous people have built institutions for natural resource management are scarce, including for Sami communities, which has made it difficult to understand how they governed. In need of a baseline, scholars turned to Tanner's (1929) study of the Skolt Sami. He argued that Sami groups were scattered during summer and gathered in winter villages, to make collective decisions. The decisions in the group, that he called the *siida*, were made by senior members headed by an elected president. Even though he based his findings on Skolt Sami in northeast Finland, he claimed that similar institutions once existed among the Sami in northwest Fennoscandia but had been dismantled in the encounter

with early modern states. Tanner's centralized governing model became widely accepted across disciplines but from the 1980s, and particularly in the last two decades, it has been increasingly challenged and rejected ([Eidlitz Kuoljok 1987; 2011; Karlsson 2006; Aronsson 2009; Wallerström 2018](#)).

With the 'winter village' theory rejected as an explanation for pre-modern Sami governance, no alternative models have been presented, and while recent studies have been informative about various aspects of Sami prehistory, they present restricted insights into governance. To establish a new baseline, key concepts that are common in any scholarly discussion about Sami history, governance, economy and property rights must be disentangled. These represent the building blocks of the society—*actor groups* (*siida*), *Sami village*, *Sami district*—and are connected to the concept of *tax land* (swe. *skatteland*). A central question is if these concepts were intrinsically Sami or imposed by the state for taxation and trade. To the confusion, one can add that scholars have used some of the concepts with different meanings, underscoring the need for clear definitions in future research. Moreover, all governance and economic systems rely on key concepts or units of construction that outline how use of land and water is organized. Defining these concepts is not only necessary for understanding the Sami context but also for making comparisons with other governance systems.

Even though pre-modern Sami governance remains poorly understood, evidence suggests that it became more nested into the state's governing systems during the early modern period. In fact, by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Sami had lost much of their earlier self-governance capacity and become governed by state institutions such as County Administrative Boards ([Lundmark 2006; Lantto 2012](#)).

By defining key concepts and the evolution of Sami and state governance it is possible to discuss how economic changes impacted households, actor groups and Sami villages. It will pave way for a discussion about differences in social relations and governance between foragers and pastoralists. There are for example reasons to believe that pastoralists require more complex social relations and governing structures than foragers. When studying the origin of a more complex governing regime for commons in medieval Western Europe (the Lowlands), De Moor ([2015](#)) found that in an emerging economy, people started to make alliances with others who had similar lifestyles at the expense of kinship relations. Similarly, we ask how the shift to pastoralism impacted collaboration among the Sami and whether it spurred a need for better and more robust governance structures beyond kinship groups that could facilitate seasonal migration. One of the contradictions

in pastoralism is that it requires mobility, flexibility and reciprocity as well as predictability to plan ([Fernández-Giménez 2002:50–51](#)). Hence, as foraging households shifted to pastoralism, more complex social relations emerged.

The initial shift from foraging to reindeer pastoralism has been roundly debated, especially in northwestern Fennoscandia. Scholars there are divided between those who argue for an early transition during the Viking Age (AD 800–1500) or earlier ([Storli 1993; Bergman et al. 2013](#)), and those who argue that it took place during the early modern era ([Hultblad 1968; Arell 1977; Lundmark 1982](#)). In addition, the discussion also extends to whether the shift was rapid or gradual ([Lundmark 1982; Bjørklund 2013](#)).

One problem in determining when it happened is the inconsistent use of the term 'pastoralism' ([Bjørklund 2019](#)). In many studies, it has been used too indiscriminately in conjunction with small reindeer herds in a foraging economy, leading to contrasting interpretations. Hansen and Olsen ([2014:194](#)) conclude that 'the extent of reindeer herding even in the sixteenth century generally seems to have been very modest in relation to later levels of "full nomadism"'. Evidence supporting the shift to pastoralism around 1600 includes the first historical references of large, domesticated reindeer herds from the seventeenth century ([Rheen 1897; Lundius 1905](#)), a sudden decrease in wild reindeer populations correlating to an increase in domesticated herds ([Vorren 1978, 1980; Lundmark 1982](#)), and genetic shifts separating wild and tame reindeer in the early modern period ([Bjørnstad et al. 2012](#)). It is now largely accepted that the transition from a foraging economy to reindeer pastoralism started around 1600 and that northwestern Fennoscandia was among the first regions where it happened ([Istomin 2022; Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022](#)).

## SHEDDING NEW LIGHT ON SAMI SOCIAL RELATIONS

There are surprisingly few studies about early modern social relations within Sami society, and how people were impacted by the shift from foraging to pastoralism. One reason is the long-standing notion that pastoralists are intrinsically egalitarian ([Salzman 2004](#)). Despite evidence of economic disparities within and between pastoralist groups scholars have argued that economic inequalities only are temporary since for example animal numbers fluctuate naturally, and people have successful institutions for redistributing wealth. Thus, a 'rich' pastoralist could lose many animals, maybe in a drought or from lack of grazing, and become poor only to regain his wealth the next year. Other scholars have acknowledged that there are economic differences within pastoralist societies and



argued that egalitarianism is not primarily a question of economy but of politics. So, they argue that economic differences did not cause social stratification or economic differentiation (Salzman 1999, 2004). However, yet others argue that pastoralist societies are not egalitarian and that economic inequality leads to social inequality (Fratkin and Roth 1990; Bergerhoff Mulder et al. 2010). Today, inequality is interpreted as universal, and the question is not so much if there is inequality in pastoralist societies, but what form it takes. From the Anabarski region in Siberia, it is known that rich reindeer owners focused more on herding, and poor people either worked for rich herders or left their reindeer in the herds of wealthy people and hunted seasonally for wild reindeer and Arctic foxes (Ventrel 2006). Also, for a long time, gender relations were missing in discussions about inequality in pastoralist societies (Hodgson 2000; Yurco 2022).

Most studies about inequality and social relations among pastoralists rely on contemporary fieldwork and twentieth-century sources. Studies have concluded that family structure was a response to the environment in which the society was embedded (Istomin and Dwyer 2021; Khlinovskaya Rockhill et al. 2022). Historical studies of social relations among the Sami in northwestern Fennoscandia, have examined demographics and marriage patterns in written records from the eighteenth century onward, focusing mostly on the period when reindeer pastoralism was declining in favor of reindeer ranching (Kvist 1989; Sköld 2004; Nordin 2009). Consequently, we lack knowledge about social relations and inequality in early modern reindeer herding societies. Since the sources make it possible to study communities that practiced both foraging and pastoralism respectively, future research can reveal how households, actor groups, and networks transformed during this crucial period. Such analyses could also help us to better understand the present situation for Indigenous groups in northern Eurasia.

As mentioned before, the Bloomington School on Political Economy emphasizes the importance of considering social complexity in CPR management. Accordingly, social aspects must be part of a self-governance analysis. To better understand the transformation to pastoralism in early modern Sami societies we have identified four themes that need to be addressed:

**1. Property – inheritance and gender:** Pastoralists prioritize herd management and rely on large herds of grazing animals that move over great distances to find available feed and/or water. Like other pastoralists, the Sami's grazing animals were their central asset and producers of capital. They depended on grazing with many reindeer on low-yielding lands leading

to a common property regime in the boreal forest and on the alpine tundra. The foraging economy, in contrast, operated under a private property regime that granted exclusive rights to lands for fishing and hunting (Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2020; 2021; 2022). As pastoralism unfolded, grazing land rapidly gained value. This raises key questions: How was property structured in pastoralist vs. foraging households? Did it vary by household, gender, or inheritance practices?

**2. The rich, the poor, and social justice:** The shift to pastoralism led to unprecedented accumulation of wealth through reindeer herds which in turn gave rise to economic disparities within Sami society. It shifted from an economically uniform society to a society with more pronounced differences between rich and poor. It raises vital questions: Who was rich, and how was wealth displayed (jewelry, diet, clothing)? Who was poor, and what did poverty mean? Were there strategies to address inequality at individual, household, or institutional levels? What role did social justice play?

**3. Organization of labor in the household and the role of servants:** In addition to grazing lands, pastoralists needed access to all available labor and employees that could tend to the reindeer and convert milk, meat and hides into commodities. In contrast, foragers who mostly lived by fishing and hunting had limited ways to increase output given their restricted resource areas and fishing and hunting techniques. This raises key questions: How was labor organized in pastoralist and foraging households? How did roles vary by gender and age? What were servants' roles in status, wages, duties, and living conditions?

**4. Households, networks, and social relations:** Social life revolved around securing survival for household members in both long and short terms. Therefore, social life and customs were tightly intertwined with economic activities. Pastoralists relied on interaction with other households, exchanging information about reindeer movements, status of grazing, and whereabouts of predators, as well as strong networks for support in crises. This formed customs like godparenthood and strategic marriages. Key questions include: How did social life differ between pastoralist and foraging households? What roles did customs and networking play, such as bride purchases?

## SAMI PASTORALISM AND SELF-GOVERNANCE IN A WIDER CONTEXT

Regional studies of Sami history have largely been insulated from major trends in surrounding agrarian societies. To fully understand how pastoralism developed and to nuance the

picture of early modern agrarian change, pastoralists in the Arctic and subarctic must be included. Hence, we argue that the transition from foraging with small reindeer herds to pastoralism should be viewed in a wider perspective: (1) alongside other reindeer herding societies in Eurasia, (2) in comparison with pastoralists elsewhere, mainly in Asia and Africa, and (3) in the context of European agrarian change. One major weakness of previous studies of early modern reindeer-herding societies, including the Sami, is their restricted focus, on a specific group or a short time span. While some studies cover multiple Eurasian reindeer-herding societies (e.g., [Beach 1990](#); [Jordan 2011](#)), none of them focuses on the transition to pastoralism.

Rangelands cover more of Earth's land surface than any other type of land (25% to 45%, depending on definition) ([Reid et al. 2014](#)). Hence, there are, and have been, numerous pastoralist groups around the globe and pastoralist groups and societies in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (including reindeer pastoralists) have been extensively covered in research. Some of these studies are comparisons between groups (see, for example, [Khazanov 1994](#)) but usually they are compilations where each chapter covers a specific region rather than making comparisons. What is still missing is comparative meta-analyses of how the transition from foraging to pastoralism unfolded across different ecological and cultural settings and the role of self-governance in this context. Future research would greatly benefit from meta-analyses comparing the transformations in northwestern Fennoscandia with similar economic shifts in other regions. Key questions in such an analysis include: When did the transition happen? What triggered it? How did it affect social relations, land and water use, and interactions with foragers? What patterns emerge across regions? How can pastoralism be framed as self-governance? Findings from northwestern Fennoscandia can contribute to this analysis.

Other meta-analyses could contextualize the development in northwestern Fennoscandia and the shift to pastoralism within early modern European agrarian change. Regional and local studies rarely include external trends, and pastoralism and agriculture have often been separated in two different 'silos', except in cases of conflict. However, integrating reindeer pastoralism into the study of early modern agrarian change is crucial both to increase our understanding of how reindeer pastoralism developed, and to get a more nuanced picture of agrarian change and the role of self-governance in this process. As mentioned, previous research has shown how a transhumance system developed in central Sweden in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries where the number of animals increased dramatically and impacted labor division and agriculture ([Larsson 2009; 2012; 2014](#)). This development

coincided with the shift to reindeer pastoralism. This raises significant questions: How were changes in animal husbandry linked to broader agrarian shifts? Did the Sami region lead in adapting to new European trade patterns, increasing labor and land productivity? It might be that Sami pastoralists were among the first to respond to a new pattern of trade in Europe and that labor and land productivity increased dramatically in the transition from foraging to pastoralism.

## CONCLUSION

This paper offers ways to rethink the discussion on governance, property regimes and agency among Indigenous societies that expands the understanding of historical transitions in the Arctic. The analysis focuses on the shift from foraging to reindeer pastoralism that unfolded all over northern Eurasia from the seventeenth century and onwards. By focusing on CPRs and identifying self-governing activities in early modern Sami society in northern Fennoscandia we emphasize the role of self-governance and underscore the significance of internal institution-building and decision-making within Indigenous societies in driving historical transformations. The analysis shows that the roles of local actors were complex and dynamic and that they actively shaped economic and social structures.

The Sami in northwestern Fennoscandia was among the first groups to develop reindeer pastoralism. Thanks to unique source materials, the transformation can be studied in detail—something not possible in other regions where similar shifts occurred. Building on early modern accounts and court records it is possible to reconstruct the livelihoods of Sami inhabitants and how they created and renegotiated rules for natural resource management based on customary rules in a changing economy. Previous studies that show how the shift to pastoralism impacted social relations and equality in Sami society are scarce. In this analysis, we have addressed themes to fill these gaps.

By applying a self-governance perspective to the development of governance structures and social organization, new possibilities open to analyze the historical shift to pastoralism in the Arctic. Additionally, it contributes decolonizing narratives in which Indigenous inhabitants are understood as historical agents and not mere by-standers in state-centric analyses. However, as [Brown \(2024\)](#) stated, there are significant tensions between Indigenous governance systems and imposed colonial frameworks that deserve further exploration. Although the state was beginning to interfere in the lives of Indigenous people in the early modern period, colonial structures

often functioned in parallel with Indigenous governance systems. In fact, as the Sami case reflects there was a dynamic interaction between customary rules-in-use and colonial rules-in-form that complicates interpretations of Indigenous societies as either autonomous or passive in historical shifts (Larsson and Päiviö Sjaunja 2022). In future research we aim to examine these complexities further to shed light on how Indigenous agency was negotiated and maintained within colonial settings.

Based on this broadened theoretical foundation, we also argue for comparative studies that move beyond local and regional analyses and take a more comprehensive approach to the transition to pastoralism across cultural and ecological settings. Other comparative analyses seek to connect the transition to reindeer pastoralism with broader early modern agrarian changes. Further research is needed to advance our understanding of this, while also placing early modern economic growth in Sami society within a wider context of early modern agrarian change.

During the past three centuries, Indigenous peoples worldwide have lost significant governing power and been deprived of their rights to land and water (Scott 1999). Our approach contributes to ways forward by gaining more knowledge about pre-colonial Indigenous governance and distinguishing them from state-imposed structures as well as investigating how Indigenous governance was affected by state structures. Since the decline in self-governance was a process that not only impacted Indigenous communities but also agrarian societies, it also sheds light on a broader change in early modern governance.

## NOTE

- 1 Northern Fennoscandia is a geographic area that includes parts of present-day Norway, Sweden, Finland, and northwestern Russia.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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